

How to ace telephone interviews

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The Internet has made it so easy to apply for jobs that most hiring managers are inundated with hundreds of applications for every position they post. “But hiring and selection is ultimately a process about people talking to each other,” said John O’Brien, managing partner of Hire Direct, the sales and call center division of Hire Dynamics, a Georgia staffing company. Once the human resources department has whittled down the list of résumés, most companies turn to an old, but reliable, form of communication — the telephone.

“The telephone interview is used to further screen out candidates from the face-to-face interview,” said Jenny DeVaughn, senior talent consultant with Talent Connections LLC, an Atlanta executive-search and consulting company. “The person will be checking for any red flags that came up on your résumé. You must be able to present yourself and articulate your strengths in a polished manner.”

Jenny DeVaughn, a consultant with Talent Connections, screens candidates by phone before setting up interviews.

Whether the call comes from someone in human resources or an initial screener, “What you want to do is confirm that his or her instincts were right to call you — that you are as good as you look on paper and a great candidate for this position.”

With less than 30 seconds to make a great first impression, and about 10 to 20 minutes to sell yourself — knowing how to pass this hurdle in the hiring process is crucial, O’Brien said. “You need to know your goal, know your audience and know yourself,” O’Brien said.

Preparation is essential

“Your objective is to get in the door for a full face-to-face appointment,” O’Brien said. You’ll stand out from the competition if you prepare ahead of time.

“If you’re working with a recruiter, you’ll know when the call is coming; but if you have applied for positions on your own, you never know when the phone will ring,” DeVaughn said.

Make sure you have given the employer the right phone number. If it’s a home number, change the answering machine to a professional message, and make sure everyone knows to take accurate messages. Always answer your home phone or cellphone in a positive, upbeat and professional way — not “What’s up?”

If the call is unexpected and you’re not ready or in a meeting, it’s perfectly acceptable to request another time. “Be polite and direct. Demonstrate your interest in the job and say that now is not the best time for you to talk. Ask, ‘Could we schedule the interview for tomorrow or another time?’ ” DeVaughn said. “Most interviewers will understand. The worst they can do is say ‘no,’ and if they do, that could be a sign about the company culture for you to consider.”

Before the call, eliminate all distractions and background noise, DeVaughn said. Make sure your equipment and phone skills are at their best. “You could be saying wonderful things, but if your phone isn’t functioning properly, it’s not going to impress anyone,” O’Brien said.

He suggests that candidates practice talking with a friend over the phone to make sure their volume, tone and pace come across as positive and enthusiastic.

“Use a mirror to watch your facial expressions. If you are smiling, interviewers will hear it in your voice,” he said. If you can, use a headset to leave your hands free. “Stand up and use the gestures you’d normally make and you’ll come across much more alert, natural and upbeat,” O’Brien said. “So many people come across better in person than they do on the phone. The way to eliminate nervousness is to practice, practice, practice.”

Know your audience

Do your homework. Use the Internet and your network to learn about the company, this position, and even the person who is hiring, O’Brien said. “This will separate you from the competition and show initiative.”

Have your résumé and a copy of your job description before you as a safety net, Vaughn said. “The interviewer wants to hear how you present yourself. Try and anticipate the kinds of questions someone would ask about your résumé,” she said. “Be prepared to talk about employment gaps, the reason you left your last position, your specialties and your experience as it pertains to this position.”

O’Brien suggests that you prepare some STARs ahead of time. STAR stands for situation, tasks, action and results. “They want to know about your competencies and accomplishments and this gives you an opportunity to succinctly illustrate them — for example, how you successfully recruited and built a sales team that exceeded its goal,” he said.

“Instead of telling the whole story, begin in the middle and cut to the chase,” DeVaughn said. “Think in terms of newspaper headlines or a PowerPoint presentation. If you say that in six months you’ve filled 50 high-level defense positions, for example, you’re prompting the interviewer to ask for more information.” Giving factual and detailed information about your job history can start a dialogue and a rapport.

“If you are given an opportunity to ask questions, ask one that you couldn’t get answered on the Internet, maybe something about the company culture or how many people and types of responsibilities there are in the department for this position,” DeVaughn said.

Know yourself

“No matter what kind of field you are in, when it comes to a job search and a telephone interview, you had better have on your sales cap,” O’Brien said. “You are selling a product and that product is you.”

You need to know it inside out. “If you took a DISC Assessment or a Myers-Briggs [Type Indicator Assessment] for work, get a copy of it to learn more about your style, your strengths and weaknesses,” O’Brien said. “Know what you do well and your short-term and long-term career goals.”

Consider asking your last five bosses what you did well and where you needed work. What kind of position do they think would suit you best?

“No one expects a perfect candidate, but they’ll be impressed if you show self-awareness,” O’Brien said. “If you believe in yourself and your product, it’s going to naturally come out over the phone and in person.”

Common mistakes to avoid

» “Being too familiar may offend someone,” said Jenny DeVaughn of Talent Connections LLC. Address someone as Mr. or Ms. unless they ask you to use their first name. “It’s better to show good manners and err on the conservative side.”

» Talking too much and giving irrelevant information is a common mistake, especially if you are unprepared or nervous, said John O’Brien of Hire Direct. Expect to talk about 80 percent of the time, since you are answering questions; but never interrupt the interviewer.

» Making negative comments. “Some interviewers may bait you to see how you’ll react,” DeVaughn said. “Don’t let down your professional demeanor or talk negatively about your last boss or company. That kind of behavior reflects poorly on you.”

» Sounding too anxious, or desperate, for a job. “Pump yourself up so that you’ll have a good tone and great attitude about what you have to offer. People like working with positive people,” O’Brien said.

» Not asking the next step. “You have to close by asking the next step in the process,” O’Brien said. The best-case scenario is for the telephone interviewer to set up a personal interview time, but he may not be at that stage yet. Learn what you can about the process and time frame for the hiring decision.

» Not thanking interviewers for their time and consideration. “Send a thank-you note to your interviewer,” DeVaughn said. Reiterate briefly your interest in the job and why you’d be an asset to the company